

Article printed in the Western Morning News, 18th August 2016, p10, regarding the Steward Community Woodland

Woodland community shows what Dartmoor should be like – Dismissing the ‘green’ residents’ appeal is an environmental mistake, writes Tom Greeves

Society progresses through innovation – in science, in arts, in rights for humans and creatures, and in how to care for the environment. But not it seems on Dartmoor: Last week a planning inspector made a decision which could lead to the eviction of 12 adults and nine children from their low-impact homes in Steward Community Woodland. This was established sixteen years ago, near Moretonhampstead.

The community, having twice been given temporary permission to continue living in the woodland, after appeals, applied to Dartmoor National Park Authority for approval of permanent residence in the woodland, which they own. The unelected Authority refused in 2015, and issued an enforcement notice. The community appealed, and the inspector, Paul Freer, has dismissed that appeal.

His report reveals a misinformed logic, a shallow understanding of landscape, and an attitude of mind that should have no place in the modern world, and certainly not within a national park.

He considers both the existing and proposed development unacceptably harms, or would harm, ‘the character and appearance of Dartmoor National Park’ and ‘the purposes of National Park designation’. Mr Freer considers the lack of a continuous tree canopy ‘erodes the character of the woodland’; permanent occupation would cause ‘irreversible erosion of the canopy cover’, despite ‘minimal’ visual impact.

Yet, for centuries, the deciduous woodlands of Dartmoor were full of human activity – by charcoal burners, bark strippers (for tanning), moss gatherers, miners, and others, whose clearings were an integral part of Dartmoor’s ancient story of woodland management. The 32 acres of Steward Community Woodland once included a farmstead – Stewardwood – and comprise numerous ancient enclosures. Field

names reveal varied historic land-use: coppicing, orchards, a pond, a barn, even a possible mill, besides woodland.

The inspector's report is perhaps most flawed in respect of cultural heritage. Since the Environment Act of 1995 all national parks have a primary purpose to conserve and enhance 'natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage'. Mr Freer mentions 'natural beauty', but omits any discussion of historic or contemporary cultural heritage. Yet, in 16 years the woodland residents have added an important and cultural distinctiveness to the Wray valley.

The inspector considers the adjoining sewage works, rifle range and the A382 to be less damaging than the 'residential enclave' in the woodland, which he says is 'urbanising', 'not well integrated into the landscape', and not of 'high quality design'.

Although he agrees that the community 'does broadly achieve its stated aims', with '81% of requirements met from the land', he argues that this level of self-sufficiency could not be maintained or controlled by planning conditions.

He acknowledges considerable local support but patronisingly dismisses it by balancing it against the 'national resource' of a national park and the 'understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities' – as if local people have no appreciation of this, nor play any part in it.

Mr. Freer blithely states that he has been provided with no evidence to indicate that it would not be possible for residents to find accommodation in the local area within a year. He does admit that their rights under the European Convention of Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998 would be interfered with, but considers that to be justified on account of the more important 'opportunities for others to enjoy and understand the special qualities of the national park'.

A national park that cannot accommodate and celebrate the community woodland clearly needs reform. The residents' lifestyle is unusual, but is refreshing and stimulating. They have demonstrated a remarkable commitment, through winter rains and storms, to a way of life very different from most of us. They are deeply integrated with the very

supportive local community. Their gentle impact on the land, philosophy and brave experiment should be celebrated, and presented as a leading example of how some of us might live in the future, supported by an innovative and flexible park authority which, since July 2013, has even introduced a policy for 'low impact residential development in the open countryside'.

The park was created in 1951 when the world population was one-third of what it is now and that of England was only 41.2 million compared to its current 54.5 million. Roger Deakin, who knew Dartmoor, wrote in *Wildwood* of a woodland community, that it was 'a practical demonstration that there is another way to live, on terms of greater intimacy with the woods and land – slower, more deliberate and benign: a quiet assertion of greenwood values.' The dismissal of their appeal is a denial of what Dartmoor could and should be, at a time of environmental concern.

Tom Greeves is chairman of the Dartmoor Society, cultural environmentalist and, as President of the Devonshire Association 2015-2016, author of Dartmoor & the Displacement of Culture: Analysis and Remedy.